



Sea Girt
New Jersey
WHERE THE CEDARS MEET THE SEA

CITIZENS BUSINESS DISTRICTS REPORT

**PREPARED AT THE REQUEST OF THE SEA GIRT
PLANNING BOARD AND COUNCIL**

JULY 2020

INTRODUCTION

At their September 2019 meetings the Planning Board and Council each commissioned this committee. It was instructed to focus on considering ways by which the downtown business districts can be enhanced. It was further directed to be responsive to observations contained in the 2018 Master Plan Revision Report:

“Disagreement arises around the future vision for downtown Sea Girt. Some residents voiced the opinion that the downtown district is not set up for growth due to lack of parking and limited customer draw. However, another contingent of residents would like to see particular attention paid to the downtown area so that it might become a more vibrant, fun, activated corridor that provides increased opportunities for retail shopping and a post-beach and post-school destination for visitors and young people. Additional stores could also provide ready, walkable access to everyday needs like groceries and services as the population ages.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We would like to thank the Planning Board and Council for establishing and supporting the creation of this committee. We realize that not all of our ideas may be politically easy to consider, let alone implement. This report's findings represent a true grass roots effort by a cross section of committed citizens.

Based on our research, study, and community outreach, we believe there are many things that can be done to improve the downtown area. While there are limitations in the short run (i.e. existing occupants, ordinances, etc.), if there is community support much can be done in the medium and long-term horizons. While some of our recommendations do require funding, most have modest costs, especially for a town as financially sound as Sea Girt. The key issue is whether or not the governing bodies are prepared to undertake these changes and accept whatever resistance that may arise (i.e. change always causes concern).

We have prepared a series of recommendations, both large and small, that should be considered. Many of the ideas put forward have been endorsed by one or several of the community mailbox inputs we received in addition to the wide-reaching research we have conducted to develop this report.

MAJOR FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

DOWNTOWN ADVOCATE

We believe strongly that there are many ways in which Sea Girt's commercial district can be enhanced. The first strategic and tactical step in doing so is to identify and support a strong leader for this effort. Our research, albeit somewhat limited, shows us that the best, and perhaps only way, of doing this is by employing a person to fill this role, albeit on a part-time basis. Both

Manasquan and Spring Lake employ such a person. Most likely this is by way of a Business Improvement District ("BID") which will employ this person and supply the financial resources this person will require for projects. Our commercial districts right now are so lightly populated with retail and restaurants that we lack a strong enough nucleus to fund a BID in the usual way. That way is to fund a BID through an additional tax on the businesses in the districts. It does not work for Sea Girt! Instead, the entire town should fund this position through existing tax revenues as we will all benefit from a more vibrant downtown. Obviously, if the BID proves to be commercially very successful, some or all of the cost burden could be absorbed by the benefitted businesses. This would certainly not happen for at least five years.

The Downtown Advocate, likely supported by a concerned citizens committee, would drive the changes advocated in our report and the many other ideas that will be put forward. Every team needs a quarterback to be successful. We must be willing to pay to have someone in this role, not an unpaid volunteer.

SEA GIRT CELEBRATIONS

We propose to enhance the greater commercial districts by having a variety of activities throughout the year, not just seasonal, that will attract both residents and visitors to our downtown area. Some of our ideas are ones successfully used in other communities and some that were advocated by citizens who contributed to our website suggestion mailbox. Most are low or no cost to the town. These include:

- Farmers and Makers Markets
- Car shows
- Music and art shows
- Food related events and pop ups (structures that provide space for a vendor for a set period of hours or days)
- Post 5K race town-wide picnic at the Camp as had been done in prior years
- Outdoor dining and seating opportunities
- Events that will attract our seasonal residents back pre and post season (i.e. tree lighting on Saturday, house tours, etc.)
- Additional spaces for the community to congregate downtown

WASHINGTON BOULEVARD FOCUS

Encourage retail or restaurant only use of the first floors. Successful downtowns have multiple open storefronts that increase pedestrian traffic – first floor offices do not. This could include zoning changes to encourage this, tax abatements, use of Economic Development Authority (EDA) kinds of financing to support redevelopment, etc.

Replace the "Smile You Are in Sea Girt" entrance sign with something much more inviting and descriptive (like featuring our lighthouse and "where the cedars meet the sea" themes).

Consider Reef and Barrel to be part of our downtown business community and invite it to fully participate in our events and activities (they already support the Chamber of Commerce's New Year's Day reception).

Add traffic calming concepts including a mid-block pedestrian crossing, walkability considerations like Adirondack chairs, bike racks, trash receptacles, etc.

BETTER USE OF EXISTING BORO OWNED DOWNTOWN REAL ESTATE

Use area around the Library for picnics in season and for the events listed under Sea Girt Celebrations.

Improve the northeast area bordering Washington Blvd. and Bell Place that the Boro owns so it becomes a town recreational area. This may take the form of an exercise loop, repaved and lighted bike path loop and many more ideas. Adding an access point to this from near/north of the Library would dramatically increase usage and support access to Sea Girt Elementary School (SGES) and surrounding area (playground, tennis courts, parking). Possible ways to do so include either a foot/bike path over or under the railroad tracks.

ENGAGE ARMY CAMP IN OUR EFFORTS

The Camp is a major asset for Sea Girt. We should pursue ways to more fully use this resource for Sea Girt's benefit. The Camp has proven itself to be a supporter of the area (i.e. use of fields, 100-year Celebration, etc.); much more is possible with focus.

BETTER COMMUNICATIONS ARE ESSENTIAL

Unless people know what is available attendance is almost always lackluster. We fully support the Boro's efforts to enhance its website up to the levels provided in other communities. It must include ways to feature the activities of our enhanced downtown.

Through the BID (possibly with support from the Chamber of Commerce) develop a town wide calendar of events/newsletters.

Instagram is the preferred media for an increasing number of people. We should incorporate it into our communications strategy.

ADDITIONAL IDEAS WORTH CONSIDERING

More handicap parking slots in the business districts

Is there a need for a two- or three-hour daytime parking limit for the downtown area?

Consider ways to attract specialty shops like Vineyard Vines, Lulu Lemon, craft shops, etc. that bordering towns do not already have.

Increase use of the SGES gym for family and community focused events like movies and scavenger hunts.

Student run pop up in conjunction with Manasquan High School's Business Academy and Brookdales's incubator program.

METHODOLOGY EMPLOYED

11-person committee broadly representative of the community with only one Planning Board member

Created Sea Girt Boro mailbox to solicit input from all community members which was widely advertised. Reviewed as a committee all suggestions made and incorporated as appropriate.

On site visits to multiple towns to understand what each does to promote their downtowns

Review of available relevant literature

Outreach to governmental entities and selective special programs such as pop ups and farmers and makers markets

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Carey Begley, Kevin Callahan, Sarah Downey, Ed Hughes, Celeste Miller, Don McLaughlin, Megan Pacetti, Chris Rice, Pat Rodgers, Mariam Savaria, John Ward, Chair